

ELEPHANT ON TIGHT-ROPE

GOP facing gathering wrath of Negro voters. Republicans' strategy on anti-poll tax bill crippled by shameful record on soldiers' vote.

Washington.

THE Republicans in Congress have got themselves into a first-rate political mess. It is hard to tell whether they yet recognize the trouble they have made for their party by their obtuse tactics on the soldiers' vote bill. But even Republicans cannot blink away reality forever, and soon the party generals will wake up to the unpleasant fact that their ultra-caginess has landed them up to their necks in contradictions. Never since 1936, when party mentors took Hearst's advice and nominated Alf Landon because he gave out noises like Calvin Coolidge, high priest of the dear dead Golden Age, has the Republican Party so blatantly revealed its lack of perspective and leadership. As it approaches the 1944 elections, Republican leadership flounders between the extremes of over-confident arrogance and shortsighted opportunism.

In the first place, the Republicans plunged into the soldiers' vote fight with a lot of half-baked preconceptions. They frankly feared the way soldiers might ballot. As paunchy Joe Martin, House minority leader, repeatedly emphasized in private conversations, he considered the legislation a matter of practical politics and he knew that if the soldiers were given a chance at the ballot, the Republicans stood to lose at least five crucial states, among them New York, Illinois, and Michigan. Come what may, Martin pledged himself and his party to avert this disaster. So he exercised all his powers as martinet to hold the Republican House delegation in line to defeat the legislation. He succeeded in saving the Democrats from the embarrassment of having the only opposition to the measure come from southern reaction. Martin delivered the House Republicans to the poll-tax leadership of that vile little mountebank, John E. Rankin, Democrat of Mississippi—with the result that the Republicans presented President Roosevelt and the administration with a made-to-order issue in the coming campaign. It is regrettable that the House did not pass the amendment to the Rankin bill offered by Representative Marcantonio of New York. This amendment provided that "On every ballot distributed under the provisions of this act there shall appear a photo of suit-

able size of the gentleman from Mississippi, Mr. Rankin; that under said photo there shall appear the following words: 'Author of the bill and leader of the Republicans in the House of Representatives.'"

The Republicans emerged from the battle self-indicted as the executioners of democracy. No so long ago, party strategists thought they had everything under control. They anticipated tying the administration into knots through the first half of 1944 on every piece of crucial legislation—taxes, price control, subsidies, appropriations, and so on. In the final days of the campaign they expected to point an accusing finger at the Democratic administration's failure to get things done—and the voters would rush to the polling booths to send the Republican presidential nominee (Tom Dewey or Bob Taft or a lesser light like Warren or Bricker) to the White House with a rousing plurality. But since the Republicans have begun to strut about in the fine clothes of "states' rights," their plans have gone haywire in a big way.

In one sense, it was their very certainty of getting away with murder that crossed up the Republican high command. It is an ever recurring wonder to observers in Washington that the Republicans can so lack perspective. Perhaps their difficulty arises from the complete negativeness of their program—they are agin the government and agin Roosevelt in particular, and they are agin that upstart Willkie who every now and then mildly insists on a progressive approach to national questions instead of advocating straight oppositionism.

WITH a few exceptions, Republican leadership is dedicated to the proposition that progress is an abomination. Their hate for Franklin D. Roosevelt passeth understanding—a corroding, all-pervading loathing that dominates every "regular" willingness to sacrifice political profit for the spiteful satisfaction of killing any proposition favored by the President. If President Roosevelt endorsed love, the Republicans would denounce it as "New Deal collectivism." The war, the peace, the safety of the nation, the chance to win votes—all that is secondary to the lofty crusade of "Getting That Man."

During the soldiers' vote debate, the Republicans allied themselves with the most contemptible of the poll taxers, with Rankin, Dies, Cox, Starnes, "Cotton Ed" Smith, Eastland, and the whole crew of fascist-minded bosses from the South. The alliance may have had a momentary advantage—though the Republicans discovered to their horror that a sizable group of southern Democrats refused to follow Rankin, and the Republicans paid through the nose for any temporary advantage they may have gained. They had planned for months to emerge as the great champions of the anti-poll tax forces and thereby to refurbish themselves as "progressives." They had it all worked out—they would stall the anti-poll tax bill until the end of the session and then make a loud fight for it. If their stalling encouraged a poll-tax filibuster, the Republicans could blame de-



Rankin rides an elephant

feat of the measure on the administration and the Democrats. If the anti-poll tax bill passed, the Republicans could claim full credit. It was all very neat until the soldiers' vote bill came along, and the Republicans joined with the southern reactionaries in a fight to preserve the poll tax under the shabby banner of states' rights.

The party had been rubbing its hands over the prospect of corraling votes among minority groups—particularly among the Negro people. The GOP publicity department had begun to warm over the chestnut that the Republicans are the bearers of the Lincoln tradition. The Negro vote was considered all but in the bag. What most people don't realize is that this vote can be decisive in more than one hundred congressional districts where elections are usually close and where Negro voters can shift the balance to either side. Then, too, the Republicans start with a functioning machine among the Negro people. They can count on a certain number of regular supporters going down the line for them.

IT WAS the poll-tax issue that was to become the great bid for Negro backing—that, plus the constant abuses suffered by the Negro population (which cannot necessarily be blamed solely on the Democrats, but for which the administration could be made to suffer). On the record, the Republicans could point to Willkie's sympathy for the struggle of the dark-skinned peoples of the world, and to Willkie's further contributions in defense of Negro rights. No matter what Republican big-wigs think of Willkie, they are willing enough to use him to catch votes. The Taft wing assiduously cultivated Perry Howard, a Negro national committeeman from Mississippi willing to serve the highest bidder. Taft went so far as to intimate that he would vote for cloture in the Senate to assure defeat of the poll-tax. Rep. Bender, Republican of Ohio, had defended Mrs. Mary McLeod Bethune and William Pickens during the Dies-poll-tax onslaught against them last year. Rep. Bolton, also of Ohio, changed her position on the poll-tax issue on Bender's advice. Even Joe Martin played the game.

Governor Warren of California and the Republican crowd in Missouri threw some patronage to Negroes loyal to the state machines. Mayor LaGuardia—claimed by Republicans only on very special occasions—had appointed Negro leaders to important city posts: Myles Paige to the court of special sessions, Jane Bolin to the domestic relations court, and Herbert Delaney as tax commissioner and later to a judgeship. Boss Joe Pew of Pennsylvania fell in line; he placed Emmett J. Scott, publicity director for the Negro branch of the Republican National Committee, in the job of personnel director of the 18,000 Negro workers in Pew's Sun Shipyards. Best of all, the invincible Tom Dewey had shown political intelligence by wooing the Negro vote in

appointing Negroes to high positions when he was district attorney; and as governor, he selected C. B. Powell, editor of Harlem's largest newspaper, the *Amsterdam Star News*, to serve as the first Negro member of the state athletic commission; and he appointed Ellis Rivers as assistant district attorney and later supported him in his successful race for city court justice.

The Democrats, for their part, stood to inherit all the headaches of discrimination and maltreatment of black Americans. Every shortcoming of the Fair Employment Practice Committee could be used to belabor the administration. Jim Crow in the Army, the Navy's reluctance to allow Negroes to become officers or to join the WAVES, appeasement of the poll-taxers, even the riots fomented by Ku Kluxers and Nazi agents would be laid at the administration's doorstep. And this was facilitated by the hesitancy of certain groups within the Democratic National Committee and within the party machine to fight directly for the Negro vote. The Democrats, torn by the contradiction of being the party of Roosevelt and also the party of the poll-taxers and the Farleys, were both inefficient and backward in their work among Negroes.

Yet the Republicans muffed the ball. On the soldiers' vote they lined up with Rankin, and it was their crowd (with a few honorable exceptions like Bender and LaFollette of Indiana) who cheered themselves hoarse when Rankin hit the top notes of his racist hysteria. Having recemented the alliance with the worst of the poll-taxers, the Republicans discovered that it was neither so easy nor so profitable to break it off. The fate of the anti-poll tax bill is now anybody's guess. There are those who believe that the Republicans will try to obscure their ugly performance on the soldiers' vote by throwing their forces behind poll-tax repeal. But there are others who feel that the party no longer dares break its alliance with the southern reactionaries.

ONE characteristic of the Republican die-hards is that given an inch, they seem unable to forego the temptation to hang themselves. The Republicans have publicly smeared themselves in the soldiers' vote fight and they have done so with maximum fanfare. This should be good news to those who realize that the main issue of winning the war and carrying through the Teheran decisions for a peaceful postwar world requires the drafting of Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1944, and assuring him a functioning majority in the House and Senate.

Perhaps the Republicans, despite their incompetence, can still hope to hold on to some of their following among the older, more substantial Negroes. But this group is a minority. The younger ones, those who suffer most from discrimination, the hard-working majority, are likely either to support President Roosevelt at the polls (in the urban areas this can spell the difference

between victory or defeat for Democratic candidates), or to stay away from the polls altogether as they have too often in the recent past. The Negro voter is both alert and practical. He is willing to support candidates from whom he can expect a minimum of sympathetic understanding and some desire to protect his basic rights. The experience in recent elections proves this many times over, most directly in New York City, where the Harlem population supported the Communist Ben Davis and the Republican Ellis Rivers regardless of party labels. Wherever a candidate has shown a disposition to recognize the problems of the Negro people, he has received strong support.

Too often the Democrats approach the Negro voter mechanically, or with condescension. Too often, the party refuses to run a Negro for office and instead offers a run-of-the-mill precinct hack. It is not enough to hand out leaflets now and then in Negro districts and let things go at that. Nor is it sufficient to make one Fourth of July oration to Negro voters during an election campaign. The Negro has been consistently abused and excluded; his natural reaction has been to shy away from the polls—"What difference does it make whom we vote for?"—unless he can be shown that he stands to gain by supporting a particular candidate. The Democratic campaigners dare not sit back smugly and point to the President's picture, trusting to luck and the weather. The problem is to penetrate Negro communities, to register the Negro voters, to get them to the polls, to help them take their rightful place in the community and the nation, to offer them candidates, including Negro candidates, who will command their support.

In this respect, the labor movement can make a profound contribution. But labor too must be willing to think creatively. The CIO, for example, has a splendid program on Negro rights. And the Hillman Political Action Committee of the CIO quite correctly stresses getting out the vote through local unions. So far as the Negro vote goes, however, it is not enough to rely on local union meetings. The fact is, Negroes as a group still are shy, inclined to stay at home instead of attending local gatherings. What is true of Negro men is doubly true of women, who have the added burden of housework and caring for the children. To reach the Negro electorate means to recognize obstacles and to overcome them. Contacts must be established with Negro organizations, especially church and neighborhood groups. Intensive house-to-house canvassing by squads of Negro and white doorbell ringers can alone stir the Negro people into action. The work may be difficult, but it promises to pay off richly.

Opportunities have been augmented by Republican stupidity. The issues emerged clearly enough during the debate on the soldiers' vote. All but a handful of Repub-

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